HOLIDAY Gift Guide

Maelstrom And Beyond

Carrying The Torch For Mac Shareware

BY KEVIN M. SAVETZ

Maelstrom is a successful and addictive shareware game—for the Macintosh. Its author, Andrew Welch, is a 22-year-old photography student at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Welch started working on Maelstrom around August 1992. "Maelstrom," he explains, "was my attempt to prove to the naysayers that fast-action, pulse-quickening arcade games are a natural for the Macintosh."

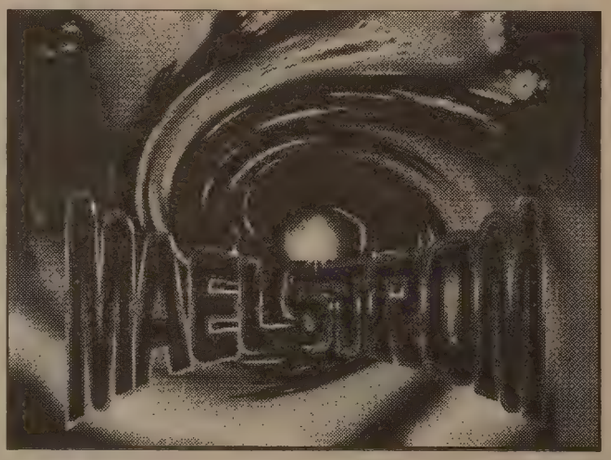
Over the years, the Mac has had trouble being accepted as a game machine. This is something of a chicken/egg problem says Welch, "Many DOS publishers snubbed the Macintosh game market by providing terrible ports of their DOS games, and then wondered why the sales were abysmal.

"Macintosh users are an indignant bunch, who expect software to meet certain standards. Making them feel like they were using a DOS machine was one of the few first-class tickets to failure in the fledgling Macintosh game market."

So he got to work. Although Maelstrom was Welch's first attempt at writing a game, he has been doing other programming projects for years. His previous ventures included a variety of commercial applications, freeware and shareware programs, including FlashWrite, Easy Envelopes Plus, and about fifteen others.

For a long time, he'd wanted to write games, and specifically to revamp the classic Asteroids game. In Maelstrom, he created one of the most popular Mac shareware games ever, and won the 1993 Shareware Industry Award for best Macintosh program.

"I set out to try and write a fun, fast-paced action game to please my own secret



desires, and to say 'Look here, it can be done: stop festering in excuses.'" Welch notes that the development of Maelstrom was "truly a fly-by-night affair that took place entirely on America Online. I'd get new artwork to put into the program, add a few features, and send it out electronically to the play testers to see what they thought of it. This happened numerous times; the game developed in fitful steps until finally, mercifully, it was ready for public release."

Collaborating online has its advantages—allowing a variety of far-flung people to playtest the game and offer opinions. The downside, Welch points out, is that he's never met in person any of the people who were involved with Maelstrom.

Although he has no way of knowing how many people are playing Maelstrom, Welch says people have been very supportive in paying the game's $15 shareware fee. "Regardless of the returns financially, I consider Maelstrom a success in my own terms: I think it is an enjoyable game, and I've finally got my version of Asteroids running on the big screen."

Maelstrom's success brought on an ironic twist: "I've even got quite a few requests for a DOS version of Maelstrom, which shows that there is some justice in this world."

Welch has even had offers from several game companies to make Maelstrom a commercial game, but has declined the offers. "I've decided against it for several reasons, not the least of which is that I think we need decent shareware games for the Mac. I also truly enjoy 'marketing' the game myself; the old maxim of too many cooks spoil the brew is definitely true. My only regret is that Maelstrom will reach fewer people as shareware than it would if it were distributed commercially."

Since its initial release, Maelstrom has evolved though numerous revisions and changes, but Welch considers it finished, only releasing new versions for bug fixes. "There comes a time when you must consider a work finished, put it behind you, and move on to other projects. I definitely plan to continue issuing updates to Maelstrom if any bugs are found, but other than that, I think it is time to declare the game done and move on. Otherwise I'd spend all my time tweaking Maelstrom instead of doing something more intriguing such as working on a new game."

What about the next game? "I really can't give anything about it away, because I'm not exactly sure myself what my next project will be. I've been working hard to build a killer set of core routines that will not only make my next game really cool, but will also allow me to churn out games much

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more quickly. Once those are done, the game that gets done is up in the air."

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Maelstom is written in Think C, composing eighteen thousand lines of C code and nine thousand lines of inline assembler for the speed-critical portions of the game.

Welch is a self-taught programmer. "I've taught myself far more than I've ever learned through a structured environment such as the classroom; it's a lust for knowledge and excellence that drives me. I like to blaze my own trail; others may do far better taking formal classes. It really depends on your inclination. I wouldn't necessarily recommend this approach to anyone else, it depends on your personality.

"The most time-consuming part of programming was getting the animation done correctly, because there was no source I could go to in order to find out how to do it right. It was a lot of trial, error, and timing. There were a lot of pieces that had to fall into place before the game itself was playable. That was the most frustrating part—a very high curve before I could even see if Maelstrom was turning out OK."

WHITHER SHAREWARE?

Why write shareware?

"When I was first exposed to the idea of shareware, I was quite impressed. From the practical side, the entrepreneur in me was awakened to the possibilities: here was a way to beat the system, venturing out with a little luck and a lot of hard work to pave my own way. I also looked on existing shareware authors with a degree of respect, because if you depend on the honesty of others for your livelihood, you must have substantial faith in human nature—it goes with the territory."

Welch adds, "Idealism wasn't the only driving force that me into the shareware market. I didn't have much choice. It is quite hard to get a program written—let alone published—with little experience behind you. Shareware was a way for me to learn, create, and market all at the same time." He finds the shareware market reminiscent of open markets in Mexico, where vendors sell their hand-made wares in improvised booths. Customers must hunt through a myriad of products to find a diamond in the rough, with no slick advertisements or other inducements pointing the way. "I found this somehow refreshing, dealing with an individual instead of a trademarked logo, and taking active participation in barter rather than being spoon-fed information from ad agencies. Quality

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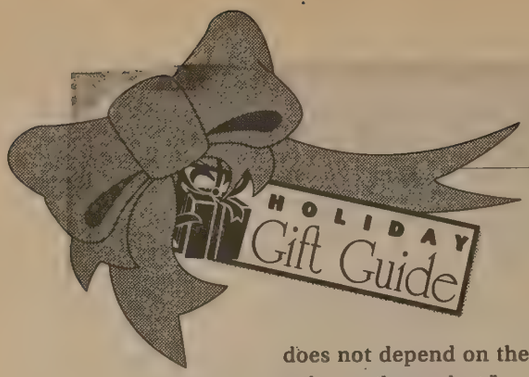

does not depend on the packaging, but rather on the product."

Welch's first shareware products were typefaces, not programs. "I enjoyed designing typefaces, and the fact of the matter is that I couldn't do much more; I simply didn't have the programming know-how to do anything significant. But then I decided that I wanted to make a complete package wrapped around the typefaces I created, so I stumbled into programming quite accidentally.

"The typefaces actually went over quite well in my opinion—but then again if I got a letter a week I was ecstatic, because it meant that I had succeeded in reaching out to the world at large. Every letter was a success, because it meant that someone had judged my work as worth paying for on their own terms, after using the product. This is akin to reading a book and then sending the author payment if you deemed it worth your while; quite a different world indeed!"

Will shareware prosper as an industry? "I think there will always be a place for shareware, just as there will always be a place for the farmer's market and mom-and-pop businesses."

"Shareware is an excellent proving ground for the budding programmer, and it is also a real grass-roots method of doing business. You are very close to your customers, and you have complete control over your product and prosperity."

Welch's "rules" for success in the shareware market are simple: "One—provide a quality product. This seems like common sense, but I see many programs out there that are complete garbage, and the author is asking $25 for it! Then he or she is disappointed when it doesn't go over well.

"Two—maintain the product by listening to what people want and improving it. People will be much more likely to support you if they see that you are actively working on improving your products. Free updates are a must."

"Three—make it easier for the person to register. I think the reason many people don't register for shareware programs isn't because they are dishonest; they just don't get around to it for one reason or another. With the number of things we all have to deal with in our daily lives, this is understandable."

DATA HIGHWAYS AND BEYOND

Welch believes that as we move toward being linked on a worldwide computing network, the electronic method of distribution will be a much more important player. This in turn could benefit shareware authors, even at the expense of commercial software producers who will be less able to rely on packaging and advertising.

"A person at home can tap a few keys to find a program that suits their needs, use it for awhile to verify that it really does work

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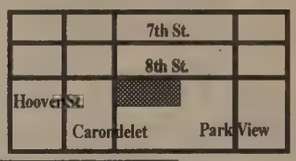

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for them, and then pay a reasonable price for the product because of the low-overhead nature of electronic distribution," Welch speculates.

Data highways, though, are just the beginning. "Our abilities are infinitely more advanced than our capability to express them—there is always a barrier between what we think, feel, and imagine and what we do, express, and create. Perhaps it's nature's way of keeping us humble.

"For me, the Macintosh was a tool that broke through some of these barriers, creating a connection between man and machine that eliminated some of the awkwardness I'd felt when working on other computers. With other machines, I was always painfully aware that I was using them; with the Macintosh, I forgot about the tool and concentrated on the ideas.

Welch has even had offers from several game companies to make Maelstrom a commercial game.

"Ultimately I believe that computers will be literally linked directly to our minds, eliminating most of the physical barriers altogether. Our evolution and progression is no longer in ourselves, it is in our knowledge and consequently in our tools. Since it seems our primal stuff will not change much or soon—and since we are a notoriously impatient beast—my best guess is that we will continue to improve and integrate the tools we use, to a point that they will become a literal extension of our minds." ■

Copyright © 1993 by Kevin Savetz. Kevin is a computer journalist living in Arcata, California. All he wants for Christmas is 16 megs of RAM. He can be reached via electronic mail on the Internet: "Savetz@rahul.net"; on America Online: "Savetz".